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Understanding Female Suicide Terrorism in Sri Lanka through a Constructivist Lens

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Suicide terrorism has been an increasing phenomenon with global implications since the 1980s. There have been over 1,944 suicide attacks globally,[1] most emanating from Islamic fundamentalist organizations.[2] However, many organizations have taken their cues from the strategy and tactics of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who have implemented a consistent suicide terror campaign since the start of their nationalist independence movement in 1987. Sri Lanka has experienced a unique culture of martyrdom distinct from those created by Islamic fundamentalists, primarily in their extraordinary use of female suicide bombers. Since 1987, there have been at least 109 LTTE suicide attacks, 23 of which were conducted by women, and many of the latter targeting political and military leaders.[3]

Most analysts agree that Tamil suicide attacks were used primarily as special weapons to infiltrate tightly controlled military targets.[4] The utility of this tactic is not unique to the Tamil movement and has been utilized as a prime motive by nearly every organization choosing to implement women as suicide bombers. However, behind every tactic are larger social demands striving for recognition. These social movements are driven by norms, identity, and social structures that define sub-state actors in turmoil. This study of female suicide bombers will seek to address how agency and structure of Tamil society were systemic factors driving the organizational imperatives of the LTTE.[5]

In the case of Sri Lanka, I argue three primary factors suggest a constructivist interpretation provides a more sufficient tool for understanding the use of female suicide bombers. First, a number of institutional programs promoted discrimination, suppression and violence against Tamil society; second the LTTE organization was able to harness discontent and mobilize women as protectors of the Tamil nation; and third, the above two factors were skillfully wrapped in a narrative of cultural liberation that outlined the necessity of female martyrdom. While realist notions of the utility of female suicide bombers as a military tactic provide a valuable explanation, the tactic's emergence is better explained by understanding a broader spectrum of components developed in this article.

The relationship between the individual and the social structure is viewed differently between rationalists and constructivists.[6] Rationalists view structure as a "function of competition and the distribution of material capabilities" and view rational acts as cost-benefit calculations producing outcomes that maximize the interests of the state.[7] Constructivists recognize the utility of material factors in the process of agency, but they focus more on "norms and shared

understandings of legitimate behavior." Rather than being driven purely by self-interest, actors make choices based on what is considered legitimate within the structure of society's values, norms, and other institutions. Structures restrict and also compose the identity of individuals, organizations and states. Relationships and norms form around political, social, and cultural factors thus developing an evolving structure, one that creates space for agency, or the ability of individuals to influence the environment they live in.[8] In this case, how structure influenced Tamil society to accept female suicide bombers as a viable military strategy will be examined.

This article does not seek to discount realist objectives behind organizations implementing suicide attacks; these are certainly prevalent and part of the overall military strategy. Many explanations of female suicide bombings involve explicit materialist calculations. Understanding there were tactical benefits behind these attacks, this article seeks to understand the less obvious social and ideational determinants of female suicide bombers. Is female suicide bombing simply a tactic adopted in response to material incentives, or can it be better understood as an expression of societal decline driven by ideational variables? If particular structural and cultural stimulants existed in the Tamil independence movement, individuals and organizations within the Tamil body politic may have been more prone to endorse female suicide bombers than for tactical reasons alone.

It is the primary argument of this article that a constructivist approach provides a more comprehensive explanation behind the emergence of female suicide terrorism in Sri Lanka and ultimately how sub-state organizations choose military strategies. This article does not see structural conditions as necessary conditions, since terrorist organizations could act independent of any larger social movement, however the conditions are sufficient as explanatory tools. Closer analysis of the conflict in Sri Lanka and particularly, the LTTE organization shows that their approach cannot be understood purely by realist perspectives but must address social structures in Sri Lanka.

This study can help analysts understand the structural characteristics that lead societies in conflict to evolve towards accepting the use of female suicide bombers. Ultimately, this study helps us understand the conflict in Sri Lanka. It enables us better to understand the causes of a dangerous terrorist phenomenon and how to effectively combat it. It can also shed light on the debate between materialist and constructivist approaches in international relations theory, particularly as they apply to the formulation of military doctrine.

Review of the Literature

The conflict in Sri Lanka, one of South Asia's longest and deadliest since post-colonial independence, has recently come to a turning point, as the Sri Lanka military destroyed Tamil strongholds in the north and east and assassinated the legendary, cult-like leader of the LTTE movement, Velupillai Prabhakaran.[9] Since 1983, over 70,000 people have been killed from the separatist conflict in Sri Lanka.[10] Since the end of the civil war, about 250,000 Tamils have been detained in Western-funded, military-run detention camps in northern Sri Lanka.[11] The

quarter-century struggle for Tamil independence now rests on the shoulders of a broken LTTE organization operating outside the island country. The Sinhalese community forms the majority of the 20 million population in Sri Lanka at 82 percent. Tamils, concentrated in the north and east of the island, form the largest ethnic minority in Sri Lanka at 9 percent.[12] Whereas the rebel force once held a de facto state (including a justice, administrative and full-scale military departments) in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, today authority over the minority Tamil population has been defused back to the ethnic majority Sinhalese.

While many theories have evolved to explain the rise of suicide operations, most tend to focus on a single level of analysis. Many authors agree suicide attacks occur for materialist reasons—fulfilling short or long-term tactical objectives[13] or carrying out a "strategic logic."[14] Mohammed Hafez and Assaf Moghadam, influenced by Martha Crenshaw's or Gordon McCormick's studies of terrorism at multiple levels of analysis, have developed a similar framework for understanding suicide operations.[15] In attempting to deconstruct the Palestinian suicide phenomenon, Hafez developed a theoretical framework that analyzed the role of suicide attacks from multiple, interdependent levels of analyses. Operating dependent of each other, he dissected suicide operations onto individual, societal and organizational levels of analysis.[16] Moghadam furthered this contribution by applying multiple levels of analysis to the global rise of suicide terrorism.[17] These authors recognized that individuals and organizations coordinating and conducting suicide operations do not operate independent of each other, but require involvement on both levels. Furthermore, agents must be understood within the context of the variety of structural and cultural surroundings they reside in.

Within these levels of analysis there are a variety of models one can apply when looking at suicide bombing. There are strategic models that focus on: a group's desire to signal to its adversary;[18] a group's aim to outbid others and garner public support;[19] play a spoiler role in negotiations;[20] impress foreign audiences and boost recruits.[21] Other models include tactical considerations, structural issues[22] and the psychological[23] impact of conflict and its effects on individual and group motivations. Although these models all provide useful explanations, this article will develop the idea that the LTTE's use of female suicide bombers has been influenced less by materialist issues and more by normative and ideational factors emanating from structural issues. Individual acts of female suicide terrorism may at times be better explained with rational strategies, particularly instances that include targeted assassinations of political figures, however the overall use of female suicide terrorism in a conflict is better explained via structural considerations the society experiences. By eliminating one or more of the structural variables, the propensity of female suicide terrorism may be lessened.

The LTTE have conducted a number of suicide missions against military, government and civilian targets in Colombo: the World Trade Center, the Temple of the Tooth and the international airport. One-quarter of their attacks, many involving women, have been aimed at assassinating political officials.[24] The Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female bomber on May 21, 1991. Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumarantunga lost an eye

when one female bomber attempted to kill her on December 18, 1999. LTTE suicide attacks have tended to surge during times when a military victory was important to reach a "balance of deterrence."[25]

It is unlikely the Tamil Tigers have recruited from outside Sri Lanka for suicide bombers.[26] Their targets remain within the island nation, except for the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in India. The trends show that a majority of attacks have occurred in the north and east of the country and the capital city of Colombo.

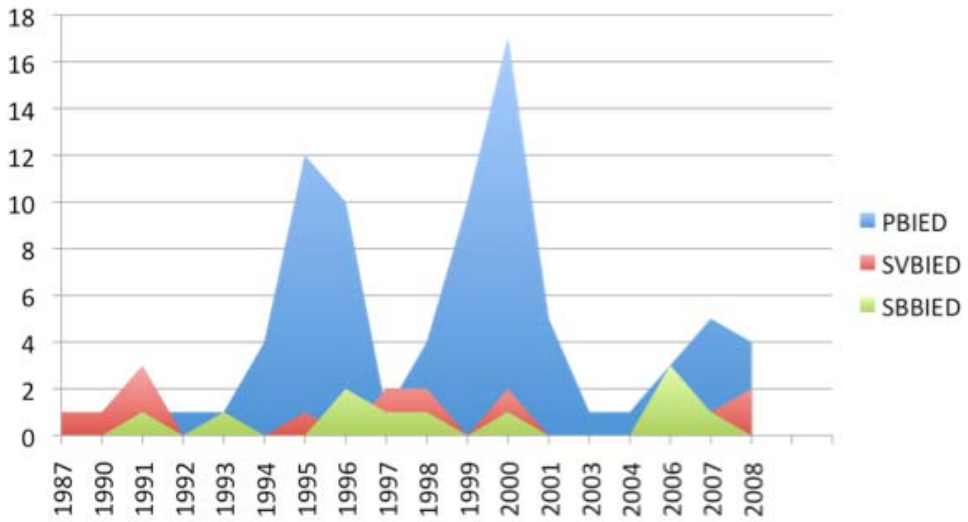

Figure 1: Suicide Attacks in Sri Lanka[27]

There are significant tactical reasons to use female suicide bombers over other tactics. Security forces tend to have more difficulty discerning female bombers from males due to traditional dress (a long shalwar kameez is often worn by Tamil women in Sri Lanka), conservative values that prevent men from touching / looking at women, and the LTTE's ability to create sophisticated bombs hidden in belts, brassiers or a feigned pregnancy. Women are also able to penetrate hardened structures easier than men by using the above techniques. Using women also provides psychological impact to LTTE military strategies via the extraordinary media attention female bombers bring.

They are also fairly efficient for they only require the death of one combatant, whereas direct assaults risk numerous lives. Thus, female suicide bombers bring substantial value to the asymmetric toolkit. However, tactics were only a temporary measure of a much larger internal struggle that occurred in Sri Lanka. The following historical outline provides context for establishing the structural factors that gave LTTE the latitude to use such a military tactic.

Historical Setting

Insurgent and terrorist organizations are essentially political institutions, representing a perceived disenfranchised group that act out and enforce their political views through violence. Through a "collective rationality" they seek to enact a "radical change in the status quo" by forcing amendments in the government structure or deposing leaders from their positions.[28] In many ways, the LTTE organization represented this kind of collective body that experienced and reacted to systemic and institutionalized discrimination from the Sri Lankan government. Claudia Brunner writes: "Political violence, terrorism, and resistance that take the form of suicide attacks occur in very specific contexts of asymmetric power relations."[29] In Sri Lanka, these occurred under a highly organized militant organization that came as a result of limited protection provided to Tamils from the state. Western history will remember the LTTE as a terrorist organization, but Tamils will always consider them a national liberation movement.[30] Western scholars should keep Brunner's insight in mind: that occidentalist representations by western analysts tend to "mask colonial and postcolonial power relations and structural violence in its multiple dimensions."[31] In other words, the West can often misinterpret relationships and perceptions other societies have with western established institutions.

Some of the structural discrimination was a result of the colonial and hegemonic institutions established by the British prior to independence and were subsequently carried over by the new, local elites. Colonialism was a reflexive pattern from the British to Sinhalese—to maximize power and control over the minority ethnic group.[32] In practice and ideology, the Sri Lankan state produced and perpetuated a level of colonial domination over the Tamil nation that strengthened and developed Tamil collective identity, particularly among women.[33]

SJ Tambiah argues that Tamil - Sinhalese identities are constructions that did not necessarily match reality on the ground. For example, the two communities frequently inter-married, spoke both languages and often converted to Buddhism or Hindu. Tambiah calls recent conflicts "manufactured—a truly twentieth century phenomenon."[34] This phenomenon was an inherited aspect of Portuguese, Dutch and British occupations. The first two colonizers pushed religious intolerance by favoring certain groups over others.[35] A Sinhalese community developed in the north and southwestern parts of Sri Lanka while a Tamil community consolidated in the north and east. Under British colonial rule, the minority Tamils were given a disproportionate share of authority. The limited agricultural yield in the Tamil territory forced Tamils to take part in civil service and administrative jobs, while the Sinhalese were employed in low-paying agricultural work. In general, Tamils flooded the upper and middle classes while Sinhalese made up most of the lower class. Structural barriers were established by British and Tamil administrators to prevent Sinhalese entrance into the professional classes. With independence in 1948, the new government dominated by Sinhalese nationalists sought to restructure the colonial imbalance and reconstruct Sinhalese as the permanent national identity at the expense of minority Tamils.

Structural Obstacles in Sri Lanka

This section will look at a number of structural factors within the Sri Lanka state that suppressed Tamil identity and facilitated ethnic violence. It will look at political and constitutional policies that discriminated against Tamils in an effort to suppress their identity while promoting Sinhalese. These factors contributed to the development of a radicalized generation of youth willing to use terrorism to uphold their ethnic identity.

The traditional homelands of Tamils are in Jaffna, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee. Tamils also reside in other areas of Sri Lanka, namely the capital Colombo. They comprise 13 percent of the island's 18 million inhabitants, while Sinhalese Buddhists make up about 75 percent of the population, and Muslims number about 7 percent.[36] While most Tamils are Hindu, there are significant Christian Tamils and Muslims that speak Tamil but do not consider themselves Tamil.[37]

A major structural factor in Sri Lanka was the encouragement of ethnic outbidding instituted by Sinhalese and Buddhist elites eager to recreate a Sinhalese-only state. In 1956, the Official Language Act ("Sinhalese Only Act") was established that made Sinhalese the only official language in Sri Lanka. It was instituted with strong lobbying by pro-Sinhalese and pro-Buddhist institutions seeking to reconstitute the country by ethnic lines, calling for a "Sri Lanka for the Sinhalese."[38] Despite, significant rioting by Tamils in the north, the policy was enshrined and became a mechanism for alienating Tamils from civil service jobs and the government. Within twenty years, the government developed an "institutional culture negating minority rights."[39] State jobs employing Tamil speakers declined from 30 percent to 5.9 percent by 1990.[40] Tamils in science-based education curriculums fell from 35 percent in 1970 to 19 percent in 1975.[41] Most significant, was the drop in Tamil armed forces rolls—from 1956 to 1970 it decreased from 40 percent to 1 percent.[42] Many of these former soldiers likely brought their skills back to Tamil militant organizations and eventually the LTTE.

Ethnic domination was furthered by the May 1972 constitution changing Ceylon into Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The 1956 language policy was enshrined in the 1972 constitution, making it inviolable. Minority protections previously put in place by the British were eliminated. The legislature was given power over the judiciary in order to depose justices that did not support the government. In 1976, the Sixth Amendment to the constitution "prohibited political parties and individuals from demanding or advocating a separate state for the Tami-speaking people as a solution to the intractable ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka."[43] This effectively marginalized Tamil political groups and forced them to begin working outside the democratic system as no Tamil political representative could openly espouse separatism and hold a seat in parliament.

Tamil reprisals were met with further crackdowns including The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979, which was a hallmark effort by Sri Lanka to use brutal tactics such as torture and indefinite detention to quell violence. The PTA gave security forces the ability to round up

anyone, including innocent Tamil civilians and imprison them without trial. The effect was an escalation of violence in the 1980s and further oppression by security forces. The inability for Tamil political parties, namely the popular Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to counter the violence led to a new radicalized generation of youth.

The 1983 riots against Tamils was the breaking point that engulfed the nation in all-out ethnic warfare. President Jayewardene in response to the anti-Tamil violence of 1983 blamed Tamils for the violence brought on them by Sinhalese.

> I am not worried about the opinion of the Tamil people … now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion … the more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhalese people will be here … Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhalese people will be happy.[44]

Tamil nationalist fervor has grown at every attempt the Sri Lanka government made to undermine national determination. A combination of failures to bridge differences between groups through a constitutional process, poor political leadership that used Sinhalese nationalism for its own advantages, and a systematic process to undermine cultural identity among Tamils were significant structural elements that led to Tamil disenfranchisement. Assistance from foreign powers and a strong organizational culture brought the LTTE to the foray as the only party that could protect Tamils from the ethnic violence beginning in 1983. These structural factors left the Tamil population unsecured from state oppression. Tamils were forced to develop their own security mechanisms, of which the LTTE quickly became the organization that would lead them.

By mid 1989, LTTE were able to fend off security forces and essentially protect the Tamil population against their incursions. By mid 1990, they had established a *de facto* state in the north and eastern portions of Sri Lanka, especially outside the main urban areas. Between 1991 and 2000, the LTTE were victorious in a number of battles: Pooneryn, Mullaitivu, Puliyankulam, Kanakarayankulam, and Elephant Pass. In 2003, the LTTE said that armed struggle for independence (Eelam) was considered:

> a measure of self-defense and as a means for the realization of the Tamil right to self-determination [that] arose only after more than four decades of nonviolent and peaceful constitutional struggle proved to be futile and due to the absence of a means to resolve the conflict peacefully.[45]

Political and constitutional structures in Sri Lanka flamed ethnic outbidding and blocked the minority Tamil population a respectable place in the democratic process. The failure of political elites to build a balanced approach towards ethnic representation compelled groups such as the LTTE to follow a separatist path. It also forced Tamils to look towards the LTTE as their only real political voice in the process. LTTE would take this one step further by using violence to alter the uneven playing field.

Organizing a response via The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

This section looks at the structured organization that developed in response to ethnic suppression and how it was able to harmonize public rage with the radical LTTE political vision. LTTE harnessed existing Tamil militarism to achieve political, strategic and tactical aims. LTTE was also an institution that carried the norms and values of the Tamil populace. When they could not be met via the democratic process, the LTTE answered with violence.

LTTE was a centralized organization with a top-down command structure. The LTTE had all of the necessary institutions to run a de-facto state within a state.[46] It had a charismatic political leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran that ran a highly centralized system of governance outside the urban areas of north and east Sri Lanka with associated cabinet and administrative offices. In areas it controlled, the LTTE collected taxes, administered justice, provided social services and had a significant military presence to include an air force, amphibious group, airborne group, intelligence group and a suicide commando cell. The influence of the LTTE and particularly its leader was clear in the cult-like reverence followers had for the leader and organization. Senior officials in the LTTE considered Prabhakaran as "God become man [sic],"[47] others refer to him as the "sun god." Subscribing to the LTTE was not necessarily forced upon Tamils, more often they were supported due to their strong leadership and ability to unite Tamils and the variety of Tamil political parties that emerged. Few Tamils opposed the LTTE, however, some have suggested this is a result of LTTE retribution tactics for those that left or did not subscribe to their organization.[48]

Another structural factor that empowered the LTTE was foreign influence. The LTTE had obtained illegal weapons through a variety of arms markets in Burma and Singapore where large Tamil communities live.[49] They also received up to $300 million per year from an established diaspora around the world and licit and illicit businesses.[50] Prior to these transactions, India provided sanctuary, arms and training for Tamil guerillas early in the civil war as a way to prevent Sri Lanka from establishing relationships with other countries such as Israel and the United States. India also had a significant Tamil population in southern India's Tamil Nadu region, which lobbied New Delhi to support the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Backed by foreign support, namely training and material aid via the India Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), LTTE was able to become a formidable force.[51] Not only was India involved with material transfers, but it was a political mediator with the Sri Lankan government in an effort to win greater autonomy for Tamils. This changed when in 1987 LTTE, fearing India support to a rival Tamil political party would weaken their movement, refused to participate in a peace accord to disarm. According to the dictates of the accord, Indian peacekeeping forces (IPKF) were deployed to the northeast. The IPKF were accused of inflicting high civilian casualties, rapes, murders, and torture.[52] While India's involvement initially empowered the LTTE over other organizations, its human rights abuses also rallied Tamil passions towards supporting LTTE violence and terrorism. Furthermore, the presence of foreign troops justified arguments that the Tamil nation was being threatened. This perception, coupled with the personal experience of persecution and violence, influenced many women to join the effort to protect the homeland.

Initially, women were involved with information operations (including propaganda dissemination and intelligence collection), fundraising, logistics, medical care and recruitment. In 1983, as a response to growing pressure, the LTTE created a wing for women called the Women's Front of the Liberation Tigers. The first cadre of fighters were trained in 1985 in Tamil Nadu, India and by July 1986, the first group saw combat against the Sri Lankan military.[53] More women were recruited into the LTTE as a result of Tamil village massacres in the early 1990s. Representation of Tamil women in military, administrative and logistics positions at one time constituted approximately 35 percent of all LTTE fighters.[54] According to one researcher that spent time with LTTE women: "(…) many of the women joining the LTTE feel autonomous and able to decide about their destiny for themselves for the first time in their lives. They retain this feeling and this attitude on their return to civil life."[55] Whether most women felt a sense of liberation as cadres in the LTTE is unknown, but this seems to be a general feeling among many who have been interviewed. Many women that joined in the mid-1980s were victims of rape by Sinhalese or IPKF troops. According to the Hindu faith, of which many Tamils subscribe to, when a woman is raped she cannot be married or have children.[56] For many Tamil women, redemption of the self and nation was gained through violence. As one author writes:

> Violence justified ideologically in the name of politics structures social relations and colonizes social space, enabling conditions of possibility/impossibility. (…) Violent practice produces oppositional and binary bodies, heroic and aggressive, criminal and communal, which are hierarchized and celebrated, minoritized and humiliated.[57]

In other words, violence on one end produces a reaction of violence on the other end. While realists would argue female suicide bombers are products of an organization's material needs, constructivists would suggest the ideational values experienced from violence promote the perpetuation of further violence and bring the potential female bomber to the point where organizations can realize her utility in their materialist objective. As Nira Wickramasinghe writes: "In situations of violence, therefore, security is not only contextual and malleable, it is also fundamentally reactive."[58] The lack of a secure environment compelled women to enter a self-help process.

Massacres in the 1990s in eastern Tamil villages brought even more into the LTTE ranks. While the LTTE demanded each family give one child to the organization, women and many children voluntarily enlisted as soldiers. This increased the level of female participation in the organization and compelled LTTE leadership to relax traditional concepts of womanhood, as Patricia Lawrence writes: "…most women can easily recite the 'Four Virtues' of Tamil women: modesty, charm, coyness, and fear—now replaced by the new notions of courage, confidence, and thirst for liberation."[59]

Another structural factor that influenced the situation was the failure of counterinsurgency forces to effectively safeguard Tamil citizens. In most cases, the security forces were the victimizers and instigators of conflict. Violence as a structure created considerable levels of fear and

insecurity in Tamil society. One Tamil woman expressed this fear as such: “As a Tamil in the present day, the biggest threat is the security forces—having to produce identification.”[60] Many were detained, indiscriminately searched, sexually harassed and even tortured by state security forces or IPKF troops. This caused Tamils to seek other mechanisms and organizations to defend themselves. As Nira Wickramasinghe writes: “Thus when the state breaks its contract to protect all its citizens, people are left to create their own security.”[61] The failure of the state to provide security for its people empowered the LTTE as most Tamils sought their assistance.

A study on the intersection between evolutionary theory and political violence finds women may be more prone to violence when their reproductive opportunities are threatened.[62] Fighting involving women in a group setting in the protection of the group, such as a tribe against another tribe may make sense as one is protecting the survival of the family—however, in general, individual female violence against another tribe may not occur without these preconditions.[63] Thus, individual female decisions are highly influenced by societal / group forces. Whereas the state acts to preserve the interests and the survival of its people, sub-state groups act in the same manner, be it on a lower level. In the case of the Tamil people, where the state failed to protect Tamil interests and actively impinged upon them, Tamil identity and survival was threatened and the process of self-help ensued. Tamils were forced to protect their own interests against an aggressive Sinhalese-only system. Female participation in this struggle became a societal obligation. In an evolutionary sense, it became the fitness of women to protect the Tamil “family” through self-sacrifice.

The LTTE was efficient in harnessing the norms and values that embodied a national myth of Tamil nationhood. The threat on the livelihood of the Tamil nation was a real fear for Tamils experiencing suppression and violence from Sinhalese and IPKF security forces. The LTTE harnessed these existing fears and rallied women to protect the next generation. To do so, LTTE exploited shared beliefs and narratives that could justify and mobilize a culture of martyrdom.

Sub-culture of Martyrdom

This section looks at the culture of martyrdom in Tamil society, a structural characteristic that LTTE harnessed and channeled towards fulfilling its strategic objectives. While realists would argue that female suicide violence is a temporary adjustment to achieve strategic or tactical objectives, constructivists would add this military strategy must be “made consistent with social norms of female behavior”[64] before it can be implemented, and precedes the discussion of acceptable tactics. Sub-state movements like the LTTE used intellectual leaders, cultural themes and historical narratives to mobilize an already frustrated population to support the insurgency, and moreover, protect the existence of the nation. This is exemplified in the pervasive culture of martyrdom in Sri Lanka that embraced male and female heroes. While LTTE may have been instrumental in organizing the culture of martyrdom, it was an existing value that was wholly embraced by Tamil society and became an institution that inspired suicidal violence.

Aggressive self identity for Tamil women has generally been restricted by structures based on tradition and conservatism. While some examples of female warriors exist in historical memory, frontline combat is not given traditional approval. It's generally considered a new phenomenon that was copied off of the struggles led by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress as well as the movement led by Suhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army.[65] The LTTE has modeled its organizational structure off of the INA and has treated its women according to the INA example. The Rani of Jhansi regiment of the INA was led by Lakshmi Sahgal nee Swaminathan, a Tamil who brought considerable pride to the LTTE, inspired many Tamil women joined the INA cause. At first, the LTTE was slow to integrate women into the organization, so as not to offend the conservative Tamil culture. Women were initially given supportive roles in the organization as nurses, administrators and caretakers. Over time, restrictions were loosened as the organization needed more recruits and society experienced greater oppression from state security forces.

As the materialist value of female suicide violence was realized, institutions were established to ensure it would be legitimized and maintained. The commitment to martyrdom was a unique LTTE trait not readily seen among other insurgent groups in Sri Lanka, such as the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) group waging an insurgent movement in the south. LTTE created a special battalion for their future martyrs known as the Black Tigers. Their first attack was on July 5, 1987 when a bomber drove a truck of explosives into an army camp at Nelliyady. This day was given a sacred marking as an official Tamil holiday, called Black Tigers Day. Holidays have been an essential symbol for venerating heroes of the Tamil nation. On 19 April and 26 September, honor is given to Annai Pupati (a mother of 10 children) and Tiyaki Tilipan respectively for fasting to death in protest against the Indian Peace-Keeping Force's occupation of Tamil territory in Northern Sri Lanka. In a sense, these women have come to embody the Tamil-mother image in a similar way that "Lady Liberty" represents life and liberty in the western world.[66] Annai Pupati is represented on billboards throughout Tamil territories—adorned in bright red and gold colors, giving a "religious aura to her action and her commemoration."[67] She is often likened to the fierce goddess Durga—a warrior archetype of the divine mother. Symbols and their relation to myth are an essential component of martyrdom that builds a link to the past.

While Mia Bloom argues that the LTTE "has never made the conflict about religion," others, like Michael Roberts contend that religion had a significant role in LTTE narrative selection.[68] The selection of symbols is very important. Michael Roberts argues that LTTE strategically used symbols and ritual to "mobilize supporters and legitimize their cause among Tamil speakers, while also cementing the loyalty of their personnel."[69] One powerful symbol adopted by LTTE fighters was the adornment of a cyanide capsule around the neck. The vial itself was to be used in case the female fighter was captured. Songs, poems and martyrologies were chanted celebrating the virtue of the slow death cyanide brought.[70] One became a "walking witness" by wearing the vial proving commitment to the organization, Tamil self-determination and the willingness to become a martyr.[71]

Underlying every suicide attack are potent religious symbols depicting sacrifice, death and resurrection through martyrdom. Many argue that the LTTE are a secular nationalist organization.[72] This may be misleading since the organization actually venerates, upholds and exploits existing institutions, such as the Hindu faith. While the organization has secular minded goals, its associates have a variety of religious and secular motivations. By merging the sacred with the secular, the organization is able to harness societal narratives that venerate the concept of martyrdom. Religious ideology helps society embrace the totality of struggle, as if it is a cosmic undertaking that requires any means necessary.[73] Social movements can easily become totalitarian when language and actions commit to using extreme violence to eliminate the opposition. Organizations seek to exploit the role of religious symbolism and terminology in the context of women's virtue.[74] By introducing a narrative of "the sacred" they redefine the roles of women in society from innocent and protected to courageous and protectors.[75] These narratives become structures in which women's roles are partially defined thus allowing for the realization of martyrdom as an acceptable practice within society.

The historical narrative embraced by Tamils was an invented one that utilized prevailing norms and ideational features of Tamil identity. As Ness points out, the logic of female suicide bombing in Tamil culture was created around a "trans-historical structure" embedded within perceived historical myths, "imagined and embraced communally" and able to create "participation structures" that prompted further suicidal violence.[76] This narrative and performance based ritual which female martyrdom embodied, was able to unite disenfranchised women against a common enemy they saw as the state. While not all would become martyrs, female Tigers entered into a sacred tradition by becoming soldiers and defending their nation. They saw themselves as a continuation of the past, and the latest example of those proclaimed by LTTE propaganda, such as Sathyabama, wife of Krishna.[77] Giving one's life for the cause, be it in terms of service to Prabhakaran or fulfilling an LTTE mission, all were considered an honor.

Roberts mentions a goddess, Kannaki that has been incorporated into LTTE literature. Her representation marks Hindu temples in Sri Lanka and she is well known among Tamils. She has "both a chaste dimension as well as the character of an avenging goddess."[78] It is little surprise that Kannaki would provide a provocative image worthy of emulation. Adele Balasinghma, a sociologist close to Prabhakaron writes "behind the appearance of every uniformed female fighter, is a tender, gentle and passionate young women with all the qualities attributed to femininity."[79] The LTTE women hold the qualities of the Goddess Kannaki as a model in their aspiration to be accepted as women and revered as heroes.

Much like Palestinian political organizations, the LTTE have harnessed a cult-like atmosphere behind suicide operations, but they have also established highly professional institutions to ensure the reverence of martyrdom is maintained, such as the Office of Great Heroes. Tamils have established immaculate gravestones and cemeteries throughout Tamil territory allowing society to pay respect to the fallen. They have also built specific "hero stones" that are devised to be a continuation of stones erected in the first-to-third centuries B.C.E. to commemorate divine individuals.[80]

Similar to Hezbollah, Chechen nationalists, and Palestinian organizations, LTTE has created "rhetorical strategies" to legitimize and institutionalize martyrdom.[81] These are ways of reframing the context of suicidal violence to be made acceptable to society. A Tamil Catholic priest described the elaborate techniques as follows:

> Heroic death founded within the fire of Tamil nationalism has given birth to a new set of terms, almost all derived from the ancient Tamil religion of Saivism; indeed, within the North and East Tamil nationalism has the appeal of a new religious movement. Prabhakaran…requests the people to venerate those who died in the battle for Eelam as sannyasis (ascetics) who renounced their personal desires and transcended egoistic existence for a common cause of higher virtue. I have seen hundreds of shrines erected in Jaffna by the friends and relatives of those LTTE cadres who have died in various actions; and the rituals performed with offering of flowers and lighting of oil lamps are those normally reserved to Saivite deities and saints.[82]

The use of rhetoric is important since it creates rules and legitimacy for martyrdom, and thus a structure in which women can interpret as justification for an otherwise heinous act. Transposing religious rationale behind secular goals, LTTE has effectively channeled popular perceptions, narratives and myths to legitimize martyrdom in the name of Tamil nationalism. In this sense, LTTE women may embrace martyrdom as a purely political act as opposed to psychological, religious or revenge type motivations that are often seen in other examples of female suicide missions such as Chechnya, Palestine or Iraq.

Conclusion

This study is particularly important due to its current relevance. The Sri Lankan government continues to undermine any opportunity for Tamil self-governance, let alone provide significant structural openings in the political, economic, and state systems for Tamil livelihood.[83] Failure to negotiate opportunities for Tamils in the current Sri Lanka state could manifest the same structural conditions that led to Tamil separatism, conflict, and endorsement of suicide terrorism. How the Sri Lanka government deals with the post-conflict period will determine whether reconciliation or violence emerges.

The Sri Lanka government should understand that these sufficient conditions exist in Tamil society and a charismatic leader could harness, re-formulate, and operationalize them toward achieving political objectives. One area this article only briefly touched upon was the charisma of Prabhakaran and how this mobilized Tamil people. Assessing the LTTE movement post-Prabhakaran could show that the conditions he helped hold together for female martyrdom may be too weak to bring back. There is an intersection between what is tactically useful and what is socially appropriate at any particular time and charismatic leaders often act as the lynchpin for that relationship. This article agrees there are realist factors that drove LTTE to use female suicide bombers, but these military tactics were only viable options because of the long-term

structural barriers put in place by Sinhalese politicians, the snow-balling effect these structures had on creating ethnic separatism and the deep scars this left in Tamil society which made suicidal violence an act to be revered.

Realist theory is an important measure for understanding the tactical and strategic motives behind female suicide bombers, but it does not provide a full spectrum of their use; how they emerge; and why individuals, organizations, and societies embrace them as a military strategy. Constructivism provides a better analysis by looking at the structural elements sub-state organizations live in and how they develop their normative and ideational values that bring female suicide bombers to fruition. If certain structural factors are eliminated, the propensity of female suicide bombers may be lessened. This can be evidenced by the absence of female suicide bombers in at least one insurgency, Afghanistan. The same tactical and strategic values apply to suicide bombers in this conflict, yet women have been completely absent as insurgents or suicide bombers. The realist argument would suggest female suicide bombers should be used in order to penetrate secure environments that men cannot. But in fact, men have attempted to use the female disguise, wearing the traditional *burkha* to evade detection or police searches. A constructivist argument would suggest that women have not been given participatory space in the insurgency due to the hardened cultural structures within a highly conservative Pashtun society that prevent their inclusion in any activity outside the home, let alone the Taliban organization.

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